

Primum non nocere

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[PII_REPLACE]

Primum non nocere: a call for balance when reporting on CTE

As clinicians and researchers in traumatic brain injury and neurodegeneration, we are concerned by the tone of reporting on chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) that has developed over the past decade, highlighted in an article in *The New York Times*.¹ Misleading reporting can have unintended, negative consequences and we call for balance from the medical and scientific communities and the media when communicating on issues related to CTE.

Contrary to common perception, the clinical syndrome of CTE has not yet been fully defined,² its prevalence is unknown, and the neuropathological diagnostic criteria are no more than preliminary.³ We have an incomplete understanding of the extent or distribution of pathology required to produce neurological dysfunction or to distinguish diseased from healthy tissue, with the neuropathological changes of CTE reported in apparently asymptomatic individuals.^{4,5} Although commonly quoted, no consensus agreement has been reached on staging the severity of CTE pathology. A single focus of the pathology implicated in CTE is not yet sufficient evidence to define disease.

Recognising limitations of the diagnostic process in human pathology, pathologists are careful to note that they are merely providing an opinion, and acknowledging that another pathologist might reasonably reach a different conclusion on the same case.⁶ In diagnoses where the criteria for assessment and reporting are established by broad consensus, the expectation is that variance in opinion is minimised. However, at this time, although CTE diagnostic criteria are far from established, discordance in opinions on individual cases is to be expected.¹

Unfortunately, the uncertainties

around the clinical syndrome and the pathological definition of CTE are not acknowledged adequately in much of the current research literature or related media reporting, which at times has resembled science by press conference.⁷ Too often an inaccurate impression is portrayed that CTE is clinically defined, its prevalence is high, and pathology evaluation is a simple positive or negative decision. This distorted reporting on CTE might have dire consequences. Specifically, individuals with potentially treatable conditions, such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, might make decisions on their future on the basis of a misplaced belief that their symptoms inevitably herald an untreatable, degenerative brain disease culminating in dementia.

We propose that the principle of first, to do no harm is used when communicating on CTE, whatever the platform. In particular, the many remaining uncertainties should always be acknowledged. Otherwise, the risk of doing harm is very real.

[A: Please declare any potential competing interests, and ensure these statements match your submitted ICMJE forms]

*William Stewart, K Allinson, S Al-Sarraj, C Bachmeier, K Barlow, A Belli, M Burns, A Carson, F Crawford, K Dams-O'Connor, R Diaz-Arrastia, C Dixon, B Edlow, S Ferguson, B Fischl, R D Folkerth, S Gentleman, C Giza, M Grady, A Helmy, M Herceg, J L Holton, D Howell, P Hutchinson, D Iacono, J Iglesias, M Ikononovic, V E Johnson, C Keene, K Kofler, V Koliatsos, E B Lee, H Levin, L Lifshitz, H Ling, D Loane, S Love, A R Maas, N Marklund, C L Master, D M McElvenny, D F Meaney, D K Menon, T J Montine, B Mouzon, E J Mufson, J O Ojo, M Prins, F Revesz, C W Ritchie, C Smith, R Sylvester, Y Tang, J Q Trojanowski, K Urankar, R Vink, C Wellington, E A Wilde, L Wilson, K Yeates, D H Smith **[A: Please provide first names of all authors.]**

william.stewart@glasgow.ac.uk

Department of Neuropathology, Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, Glasgow G51 4TF, UK (WS); **[A: Our affiliations require city and state for all**

entries. I have added these for most of your co-authors based in the USA and Aus. Please check they are correct.] Department of Neuropathology, Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, Glasgow, UK (WS); Institute of Neuroscience and Psychology, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK (WS); Department of Pathology, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Cambridge Biomedical Campus, Cambridge, UK (AK) **[A: The affiliations in purple are all Cambridge University. It is our style to combine affiliations from the same institution.]**

[A: These have been combined because all are U Penn] The Institute of Psychiatry Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London, London, UK (SA-S); Roskamp Institute, Sarasota, Florida, USA (CB, FC, SF, BM, JOO); The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK (CB, FC, SF, BM, JOO); Bay Pines VA Healthcare System, Bay Pines, Florida, USA (CB); Child Health Research Centre, Faculty of Medicine, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD, Australia (KB); Institute of Inflammation and Ageing, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK (AB); Georgetown University Medical Center, Washington DC, DC, USA (MB); Centre for Dementia Prevention (CWR), Centre for Clinical Brain Sciences (AC), Academic Neuropathology (CS), and Centre for Clinical Brain Sciences (CS), University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK **[A: these affiliations have been combined because all Uni of Edinburgh. O]** James A Haley Veterans' Hospital, Tampa, FL, USA (CB, SF, BM, JOO); Department of Rehabilitation Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, USA (KD-O'C); Department of Neurology and Center for Brain Injury and Repair (RD-A), Department of Neurosurgery (MSG, DFM, DHS), Penn Center for Brain Injury and Repair, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine (JQT), Institute on Aging (JQT), Center for Neurodegenerative Disease Research (JQT), **[A: These have been combined because all are U Penn]** Perelman School of Medicine, Translational Neuropathology Research Laboratories, Division of Neuropathology, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine (EBL), and Department of Bioengineering (DFM), University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA **[A: These have been combined because all are U Penn]**; Department of Neurological Surgery, Brain Trauma Research Center (CED-MP), and Departments of Neurology and Psychiatry (MDI), University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA **[A: Combined because all U Pittsburgh]**; Veterans Affairs Pittsburgh Healthcare System, Pittsburgh, PA, USA (CED-MP); Center for Neurotechnology and Neurorecovery, Department of Neurology, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA (BLE); Athinoula A Martinos Center for Biomedical Imaging, Department of Radiology, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Charlestown, MA, USA (BLE, BF); City of New York Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, and New York University School of Medicine, New York NY, USA (RDF); Division of Brain Sciences, Department of Medicine, Imperial College London, London, UK (SG); UCLA Steve Tisch BrainSPORT Program **[A: Please provide city and state]**, USA (CCG); Departments of Pediatrics and Neurosurgery, David Geffen School of Medicine and UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA (CCG); Division of Neurosurgery, Department of Clinical Neurosciences, University of Cambridge, Cambridge Biomedical Campus, Cambridge, UK (AH, PH); Department of Physical Medicine and

Rehabilitation, Phelps Hospital Northwell Health, New York, NY, USA (MH); School of Public Health, New York Medical College, New York, NY, USA (MH); Queen Square Brain Bank for Neurological Disorders, UCL Queen Square Institute of Neurology, London, UK (JLH, HLI, TR); Sports Medicine Center, Children's Hospital Colorado, Aurora, CO, USA (DH); Department of Orthopedics, School of Medicine, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, Aurora, CO, USA (DH); Neuropathology Research, Biomedical Research Institute of New Jersey, Cedar Knolls, NJ, USA (DI); Atlantic Neuroscience Institute, Atlantic Health System, [A: Please provide city] NJ, USA (DI); Centre for Medical Image Computing, Department of Medical Physics and Biomedical Engineering (JEL), and Homerton University Hospital NHS Trust, National Hospital of Neurology and Neurosurgery (RS), University College London, London, UK; Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA (JEL); Department of Pathology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA (CDK); Department of Pathology, Division of Neuropathology, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Presbyterian Hospital, Pittsburgh, PA, USA (JKK); Departments of Pathology, Neurology, and Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA (VK), Neuropsychiatry Program, Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital, Baltimore, MD, USA (VK); Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX, USA (HLE); Barrow Neurological Institute at Phoenix Children's Hospital, Phoenix, AZ, USA (JL); University of Arizona College of Medicine Phoenix, Child Health, Phoenix, AZ, USA (JL); Phoenix Veteran Affairs Healthcare System, Phoenix, AZ, USA (JL); Department of Anesthesiology, University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA (DJL); Shock Trauma and Anesthesiology Research (STAR) Center, University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA (DJL); School of Biochemistry and Immunology and Trinity Biomedical Sciences Institute, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland (DJL); Dementia Research Group, Institute of Clinical Neurosciences, School of Clinical Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK (SL, KU); Department of Neurosurgery, Antwerp University Hospital and University of Antwerp, Edegem, Belgium (AIRM); Skane University Hospital, Department of Clinical Sciences Lund, Neurosurgery, Lund University, Lund, Sweden (NM); Center for Injury Research and Prevention and Division of Orthopedic Surgery, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA, USA (CLM); Research Division, Institute of Occupational Medicine, Edinburgh, UK (DMM); NIHR Global Health Research Group on Neurotrauma (DKM), and Division of Anaesthesia, Department of Medicine (DKM), University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; Department of Pathology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA (TJM); Barrow Neurological Institute, Departments of Neurobiology and Neurology, Phoenix, AZ, USA (EJM); Department of Radiology, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, USA (CYT); Health Sciences, University of South Australia, Adelaide, SA, Australia (RV); Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, Djavad Mowafaghian Centre for Brain Health, International

Collaboration on Repair Discoveries, School of Biomedical Engineering, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, [A: Correct] Canada (CW); Department of Neurology, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA (EAW); Michael DeBakey VA Medical Center and Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX, USA (EAW); Division of Psychology, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK (LW); Department of Psychology, Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute and Hotchkiss Brain Institute, University of Calgary, AB, Canada (KY)

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